



THE WABASH CENTER

# JOURNAL ON TEACHING

USING JAMES LANG'S "SMALL TEACHING"

## Motivation and Emotion in the High School Religion Classroom: Insights from James Lang's *Small Teaching*

Natalie Williams

*Saint Peter's Prep*

### ABSTRACT

This article explores how James Lang's *Small Teaching* suggestions for fostering deeper motivation were implemented at the high school level in sophomore and junior religion courses.

### KEYWORDS

emotion, motivation, high school, religion, pedagogical methods

James Lang's *Small Teaching* (2016) has played an integral role in helping me to transition from teaching as a contingent professor in university and seminary settings to teaching full time in an all-boys Jesuit high school. PhD programs in religion often lack specific discussions of educational theory and pedagogical methods. Graduates of these programs who end up teaching at any level gather skills along the way, usually in trial-by-fire situations, drawing on the lessons learned about teaching from our best (and sometimes our worst) teachers. When I began teaching high school, I quickly realized I could no longer rely upon the professor-as-expert mode of education to establish my authority and engage my students. Lang offers many discreet, small steps that can be implemented at any point in one's teaching career to help engage students in ways that quickly improve motivation and student learning outcomes. Furthermore, his methods are based in pedagogical research that is concerned not only with pedagogical theory but with the neuroscience of learning and measurable educational outcomes.

The religion curriculum and the administrative body of the high school where I teach allow for much creativity and freedom on the part of teacher teams who collaboratively construct the courses each year. All students take religion for all four years of their high school education. First-year students take a hybrid course that introduces them to the Ignatian history and identity of the school and then turns toward Hebrew Bible/Old Testament scriptures. Sophomores build on this foundational work in biblical studies with a year-long course in New Testament, focused primarily on the Gospels. Juniors take a Christian Ethics course that introduces philosophical ethical methods and Catholic Social Teaching. Seniors choose from a number of rotating electives including Bioethics, Finding God in

All Films, World Religions, and Art and Spirituality. The maximum class size is twenty-four students. Many students come from Catholic grade schools and/or families who identify as Roman Catholic, but the student body represents wide points of religious, ethno-racial, and economic diversity. The department is dually focused on the academic study of religion and, in keeping with our Ignatian identity, the spiritual, emotional, and justice-seeking capacities of our students.

While I have implemented many of Lang's suggestions for increased understanding and knowledge retention, which are the subjects of the first two sections of *Small Teaching*, my reflections here concern his third section, titled "Inspiration." Lang's chapter on motivation within that section helps to explain what many religion and philosophy instructors know and rely on intuitively—that students need to care about the subjects they encounter in order to learn, and that part of our job is communicating why *we* care about what we study and teach. He offers helpful tips on how to communicate and foster that care. One specific issue he addresses is the harnessing of emotion in the room to motivate student interest. In a class like Christian Ethics, which I teach for high school juniors, emotions run high in many ways. The material can be confrontational and deeply personal. In my other course, New Testament with high school sophomores, emotion functions in a different way to motivate students' engagement. Many students at this developmental level are resentful of having to take religion and are disinterested in the subject. I will discuss some of the ways that I try to cultivate, guide, and harness emotions as a part of both these courses.

Each of Lang's chapters include overviews of the educational and cognitive models that support particular ways to implement his theory. At the end of each chapter he provides summary "principles" to encourage teachers not simply to emulate his practices, but to incorporate the principles of the chapter into their own work. The three principles of the chapter, "Motivation," shape my reflections below.

### ***Acknowledge Emotions in the Room***

Lang writes that "infusing learning with a sense of purpose, and especially self-transcendent purpose" can capture student attention and help students to connect to the subject (2016, 174). While all classes in a curriculum have "purpose" and awareness of that purpose helps students understand the relevance of the subject matter, religion courses can seem alienating and useless for some. But they are rich with opportunities for highlighting "self-transcendent" purpose. In religion courses we encounter questions about meaning and morality, how to be in community with others, and how to live "the good life." Every topic we cover is in some way connected to the idea that human life and experience is meaningful precisely because of our connections to that which is bigger than the self. This concept fits well within the Jesuit mission of my school to educate and care for the whole person and to form students for service to others.

Any classroom can be a highly emotional space. Students and instructors bring their own experiences and lives to the topic and to the learning community. The subject material itself, particularly in religious studies, can be fraught with emotional baggage and trigger points. Emotions in the ethics classroom are not always positive. Learning about systemic injustice, for example, can lead to despair, sadness, and confusion. Learning about white and male privilege often leads to anger. These emotions can be destructive in the classroom if they are not appropriately addressed and channeled toward self-transcendent purpose. However, these negative feelings are often the conduit to a greater sense of purpose born out of exposure to injustice.

One tactic for dealing with negative emotion begins with naming what is happening in the room. In a recent junior class where I introduced different definitions of racism and foregrounded a definition of racism as a system of privileges based on whiteness, many of the (white) students immediately appeared distressed and started to offer the kinds of arguments that often come up when privilege is revealed—they started to turn toward ways in which whites experience "oppression." Rather than dismissing or ignoring the clear emotional undertones of the discussion, I tried to name it immediately and asked students (a) what they were feeling, and (b) to think about why they had immediately moved to a defensive position even before we had gotten through the lesson. Simply asking us all to *notice* the emotion in the room created an opportunity for an emotional pause button and facilitated a moment of self-reflection.

## ***Make it Social***

Despite the traditional model of the teacher as all-knowing source of information, students and teachers are always co-creating the classroom environment and learning from each other. While I acknowledge that my engagement and revealing the issues I care about is key to my motivating students, perhaps equally important is being willing to listen to what motivates students. One tactic for making learning social highlighted by Lang is to “Tell Great Stories” (2016, 182). One of the stories I tell in many of my classes is about falling in and out of love with Aristotle as a student. In my Christian Ethics course, students read a small portion of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* in our introduction to virtue ethics. I tell them about how much I loved Aristotle, that he made me want to study philosophy, and that I thought he could see into my life and heart from millennia away! But then I learned about Aristotle’s position on women, that he would have believed that women were malformed men, and I tell students how much that hurt my feelings. This story helps me to show students that all production of knowledge is human, and facilitates a conversation about how to assess the humanity of our heroes, particularly when they let us down. My students enjoy this small glimpse into my personal intellectual history, but it also serves to increase their curiosity about Aristotle and about reading primary philosophical sources generally.

I have also tried to use the spirit of telling great stories in a wider scope than Lang suggests. Listening to student stories and helping them to express their own enthusiasm has helped me to create more engaging assignments for my New Testament course with sophomores. In late October of 2019, Kanye West released his much-anticipated album *Jesus is King*. Members of my New Testament classes were ecstatic about the album, and would often enter class singing lyrics to the songs. We were studying the gospel of Mark and learning the basics of critical biblical interpretation methods including literary and historical analysis. I was initially annoyed by their level of what I feared was uncritical hero worship for Kanye West. I wouldn’t let them play the album in class even when they insisted it was relevant to our subject matter (they were right, it was!). Finally, in need of a mid-quarter assignment, and thinking about Lang’s admonition to “make learning social,” I decided to ask them to teach me about what they loved about West’s new album. With the help of a colleague in the religion department, I developed a four-part assignment designed to provoke their critical analysis of West and his new album, while practicing their skills of literary criticism. I provided some analysis of the album from cultural critics, mimicking the historical critical method of biblical interpretation that emphasizes contextual knowledge. I asked students first to explain the conflicts in the ways Kanye West’s album had been critically received. Second, they were required to describe his theological understanding of Jesus by citing and explicating the lyrics from one of the songs on the new album. Next, employing the information we had covered in the New Testament course so far, they compared and contrasted West’s Jesus with Mark’s portrayal of Jesus. Finally, they were invited to either critique West’s theology or to offer their own creative interpretation of Jesus in the form of song lyrics that revealed something meaningful about their own understanding of Jesus. In allowing student interests to lead, I benefited from their enthusiasm about the Kanye West assignment. Listening for and to their own interests is an aspect of the Jesuit commitment to *cura personalis* or care for the whole person.

## ***Show Enthusiasm***

Sharing enthusiasm for my subjects gives students a model for caring about the world, which is especially important at this age where their concerns about their own internal worlds are primary. High school students can be driven by how others perceive them, leading to any expression of care and enthusiasm being perceived as weak or uncool. Teachers have an opportunity to disrupt that narrative and lead students in discovering their own sense of wonder, joy, and purpose in learning. But this disruption is only possible given a relationship of trust in the authority that the teacher has developed with students. One method for the development of trust relies on appropriately revealing aspects of my identity and personality. As a general practice, I let my enthusiasm lead my teaching—I choose topics and case studies that I find particularly compelling, knowing that if I am bored with the material, the students are unlikely to develop an interest in it.

Lang suggests that demonstrating that you care about the material can significantly motivate care in your students. Students need to see what “hooks” the teacher about the topic. I have a number of topics, some not related to religion at all, about which I let students see my most enthusiastic self. On a recent summer break, I read a book about intelligence in cephalopods that I found fascinating. When school started in September, I started the Christian Ethics course with a

picture of a beautiful octopus on the board and asked students to make connections between the octopus and being an engaged ethicist—a discussion based on my expectations of them as laid out in the syllabus. I told them my favorite octopus-related anecdotes about animals in captivity that disrupt scientific studies and assert their autonomy over the desires of researchers. When I devised this opening school year activity, I was not concerned with making cephalopods fit into the course material. Instead I wanted an opportunity to demonstrate my enthusiasm for a topic, which would set the expectation that this class is a place where we share enthusiastically about the things we care about, from the most mundane to the most deeply important.

Lang’s small teaching methods offer a wealth of discrete, easily adoptable strategies that can affect the outcome of a single lesson, but they also offer the opportunity to rethink our pedagogical strategies and motivations on a larger scale. His reminder to pay attention to emotion has helped me to more intentionally embrace the organic and sometimes messy emotional tenor of my classroom and has helped me develop a pedagogical strategy that helps me and my students to learn together authentically and joyfully.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Lang, J. 2016. *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

West, Kanye, Ty Dolla \$ign, Ant Clemons, Fred Hammond, and Kenny G. 2019. *Jesus is King*. New York, NY: Def Jam.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Natalie Williams earned a PhD in Christian Social Ethics from Drew University. She is a Religion Teacher at Saint Peter’s Prep, an all-boys Jesuit high school in Jersey City where she teaches Christian Ethics and New Testament and develops programming on gender and sexual justice. She also teaches as an adjunct instructor in the theology department at Fordham University. Her first book, *For Better, For Worse: The Ethics of Divorce After Marriage Equality* was published in 2020 with Lexington Press.